

One Teacher's Opinion: The Sisterhood of the Troupe

A long-time dancer, gymnast, and yogini, Tava discovered Middle-Eastern dance (bellydance) in 2000, and she has been a devoted student ever since. Tava teaches and performs in Connecticut and New York.

As a member of Andrea Anwar's dance troupe "Raqesat el-Yaqoot," (The Dancing Rubies), she has appeared on television and performed at numerous cultural events. Audiences have described Tava's dancing as soulful, playful, and contagious. Visit her Web

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Photo: Sarah Skinner

by Tava Auslan

Two years ago, I moved from New York City to the suburbs of Connecticut. At the time, I was just so thrilled not to see armed guards on every corner and to have a little fresh air. I am still happy to have made the move, because my life is largely better since coming here. Still, there are those times when I miss the lifestyle, culture, and other uniquely New York experiences that I don't have here. One of those experiences involves dancing with my troupe, Raqesat El Yaqoot, the "Dancing Rubies."

My teacher and mentor, Andrea Beeman, director of the "Rubies," recently invited me to perform at a Moroccan restaurant in Hell's Kitchen. It was an evening of solo performances by the women in our troupe. It had been several months since I last joined them, and then had we performed one of Andrea's beautiful choreographies. This time, each dancer had the chance to really showcase their personal styles.

As the evening went on, I noticed how each dancer had improved. I could tell that they had all become performers in addition to dancers. They weren't making faces of concentration, rather, they had the delightful expressiveness appropriate to their music. Their confidence had increased to the point where they were comfortable with stillness. It was amazing to see their growth. When we finished our sets, we hugged, took a million photos together, and offered our praise for each other. This is exactly what a troupe should be, and while my "solo" dance career is gratifying, it is not complete without those opportunities to be a part of something bigger. While I do my best to create those experiences for my own students, it is a different feeling to be with a group of dance peers that have developed their skills alongside me.

The decision to "go pro" should not be something we rush into simply because we can. While we gain so much from the teaching role, and continue to grow as dancers, it does come with a price. I spend most of my time helping students or planning choreography for my classes. While I love this role more than I could ever explain, I also understand that it means having less time for my own training and practice. It is equally rewarding, but just in a different way. I hope that since we work in a field that doesn't require a degree, and our dance is so popular that it is fairly easy to find work, that we can still find the value in remaining at the student level and enjoy the process of becoming a professional. I say this with the humility of being a relative newcomer, approaching my eight year bellydance anniversary in January. Still, I remember it as if it were yesterday, trying to undulate without moving my shoulders and sticking my rear out when I did large hip circles. I remember looking to either side of me at my fellow "dancing rubies" and feeling self-conscious at first, and then later, feeling like I was dancing within a sisterhood, of sorts. Our teacher, the gracious and soft-spoken "mother," (or perhaps the cool big sister) of the group, supported our endeavors to look graceful, and her dancing still brings tears to my eyes.

I am looking forward to many years of dancing with my fellow "Rubies," albeit infrequently. I hope this is a feeling that we can all experience, even if some dancers' peers are my teacher's teachers. Far too often there is judgement, critique, and competition, but it feels great to dance within a sisterhood. These are women I never talk to on the phone. I don't know the names of their husbands or their children, but I know how they dance, and it is beautiful. I also have a teacher, who no matter how many teachers I study with, will always be the one who brought me to this place. ❧